



JOINING THE PARTY

SERIES: SPIRITUALITY OF DAILY LIFE

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Luke 15:25-32

Second Message

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On New Year's Day 1963, USC played Wisconsin in the Rose Bowl. The Wisconsin quarterback, Ron VanderKelen, was one of the all-time great college quarterbacks. I was twelve years old at the time, and our family was gathered for New Year's Day celebrations. Pete Beathard of USC threw four touchdown passes in the first half, and USC was up by a score of 42-14. At half-time, I got upset about something and I marched off to the basement to sulk. I waited for someone to come and offer the sympathy I thought I deserved, but no one did. I thought it was no big deal, because the game was practically over at half-time anyway. After the game, my brother came downstairs and told me that Ron VanderKelen had gotten hot in the second half and Wisconsin had almost completed an incredible comeback. The final score was USC 42, Wisconsin 37. VanderKelen threw for 401 yards, and 11 Rose Bowl records were broken. But, because of my anger, I had missed it.

In our studies in the parable of the prodigal son we are considering our relationship with God, centering our lives on Jesus, and having intimacy with the Father. Oftentimes, our anger and refusal to "join the party," as it were, causes us to miss much of the joy of living the Christian life. Are we refusing to join in? If we are to connect our hearts to God's heart and become his sons and daughters, this is a critical element of the spiritual life.

Today, we will consider one who refused to join the party and enter into joy. I am referring to the older brother in the story of the prodigal son. In our last study, we looked at the younger son; today, we will consider the older son's response to what occurred when the prodigal returned home. Last week, I invited you to return to the Father; today, I am inviting you to join the party.

The four parables in Luke 15 spiral in intensification. We have stories about 100 sheep, 10 coins, 2 sons, and 1 son. The parables are told in doublets of 2 and 2. The parable of the prodigal son (vv. 11-32) is a double parable, like the story of the sheep and the coin (vv. 4-11).

This fourth story concerns the older son. Let's read the text together. Luke 15:25-32:

"Now his older son was in the field, and when he came and approached the house, he heard music and dancing. And he summoned one of the servants and began inquiring what these things might be. And he said to him, 'Your brother has come, and your father has killed the fattened calf, because he

has received him back safe and sound.' But he became angry, and was not willing to go in; and his father came out and began entreating him. But he answered and said to his father, 'Look! For so many years I have been serving you, and I have never neglected a command of yours; and yet you have never given me a kid, that I might be merry with my friends; but when this son of yours came, who has devoured your wealth with harlots, you killed the fattened calf for him.' And he said to him, 'My child, you have always been with me, and all that is mine is yours. But we had to be merry and rejoice, for this brother of yours was dead and has begun to live, and was lost and has been found' " (NASB).

The older brother is in the fields when the younger son arrives home. Coming in from his labors, he finds a great celebration in progress, with music, dancing and laughter. When we arrived late one night in a small Mayan village in Yucatan last May, we heard the loud celebration of a wedding party. The celebration lasted all night. No one in the village slept, especially us. That is the kind of festive sight the older son encounters when he arrives home from a day working in the fields.

In response, he becomes extremely agitated and bothered. He feels left out. When he asks his servant what is going on, he learns about his brother's return. This angers him, and he refuses to share in the rejoicing. The father comes out to talk with him, but the older son chooses to humiliate him publicly by quarreling with him in front of the guests—a very serious matter. The conversation between son and father indicates that the older son is lost. In fact, he is doubly lost: he is lost to both his father and his brother.

The older son does not address his father with honor. He complains that he has served him for many years, thereby demonstrating the spirit of a slave, not a son. He thinks he has not disobeyed him, but this very action is disobedient. He accuses his father of favoritism. He declares he is not part of the family and would rather be merry with his friends—the same desire the younger son expressed before he left home. He also attacks his younger brother, calling him "this son of yours." The older son would rather forego fellowship with his father than accept his father's treatment of his brother.

The younger son was estranged and rebellious while he was absent from the house, but the older son was estranged and rebellious in his heart while he was yet

part of the house. The estrangement and rebellion of the younger son were evident in his surrender to his passions and in his request to leave his father's house. The estrangement and rebellion of the older son were evident in his anger and refusal to enter the house.

The context of this chapter is Jesus' receiving and eating with sinners. He was crossing over cultural and religious boundaries by welcoming prodigal children home and receiving them at his table.

In response to Jesus' hospitality, the Pharisees murmured and grumbled, just like their forefathers in the wilderness on the way to Canaan. Jesus shared the first three stories for the sake of the fourth, because the older son was like the Pharisees: they were angry because Jesus was loving unclean people who wanted to come home from a far country. They refused to enter into the joy of the celebration. Their pretense of having their act together prevented them from experiencing intimacy with the Father. They felt they were religiously secure, but they were lost. They were not sons. They would rather forego fellowship with the Heavenly Father than accept Jesus' treatment of their prodigal brothers.

A number of spiritual themes arise from our text.

The first one is this: The older son was lost because he was living by the law.

The brothers illustrate two ways we try to satisfy the longings of our hearts. All of us have deep yearnings, desires for love, intimacy, and home. We want to be sons and daughters, and so we try to order our lives in a way that will satisfy those yearnings.

The younger son sought to satisfy his desires by leaving home and seeking his freedom. He rebelled and lived recklessly, looking for love in all the wrong places. Trying to escape the aches of his lonely heart, he became a slave of sin.

The older brother illustrates another way of satisfying those same longings. He stayed home and did what was expected of him. He was the good son. He worked hard at doing what was right, but became a slave of the law.

The younger son recognized his unworthiness, but the older son felt worthy. He was convinced that keeping the law and performing up to expectations would salve the restlessness of his lonely heart and connect him to his father. He tried to gain acceptance, value and love from what he could do, but he was just as wrong and just as lost as the younger son.

That is the problem of legalism. It is a disease of the heart. When we live under law, we base all of our relationships, those with God, parents, spouse, children, and friends, on our efforts to win their approval and acceptance. Legalism is a predator that feeds on the spiritual life.

For the first twenty years of my life, I identified with the younger son. I was headed far away from home and becoming more and more enslaved. Then I became a

Christian and entered into the wonderful celebration of being "found." I had come home. But soon I sank into legalism and living under the law. I began relating to God and to my church family in the same way I related to my physical family: I worked very hard at it. When I became a pastor, following a ten-year engineering career, I doubled my efforts to try and catch up with other spiritual leaders. I was being obedient: staying at home, doing good things. But I was acting like a slave, not a son. I had no joy or freedom. My anger and resentment were keeping me from joining the party. For the second twenty years of my life, I related to the elder son: I became a Pharisee. But I learned that didn't work, either.

Listen to these words from *The Sacred Romance* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1997, p. 30) by Brent Curtis and John Eldredge: "The orthodoxy we try to live out, defined as 'Believe and Behave Accordingly' is not a sufficient story line to satisfy whatever turmoil and longing our heart is trying to tell us about. Somehow our head and heart are on separate journeys and neither feels like life."

Here is our second principle: It is hard to recognize our lostness when we stay at home.

When we are competing with pigs for something to eat in a distant country, when we are getting drunk, taking drugs, stealing, and living on the streets, it is easy to see that we are far from home. It is much different, however, when we stay home and do everything that is expected of us.

Legalism is hard to recognize at times, because it looks so good on the outside. We convince ourselves we are doing what God wants. At times, pastors encourage us along the way, convincing us that we are obeying God. When we express doubts, confusion and restlessness, we are encouraged to redouble our efforts at doing Christian things. We suppress our longings and work harder. Legalism blinds us to our lostness.

Third, it may be difficult to spot Pharisaical lostness, but there are signs just the same.

For the younger son, the sign of lostness was his addictions, his outward sin. For the older son, it was the secret sins of the heart: resentment, envy, anger, jealousy, lack of joy. Sadly, this is what we see in many churches.

Another sign of lostness is perfectionism. We think we should be perfect and so we work at it, trying to do everything right. We seek to completely control our environment. We put great pressure on ourselves to live up to our own expectations and those of others. But gradually, the weight becomes unbearable. The guilt and shame of failure is a heavy load to bear.

Another sign of lostness is complaining and competition. The older son complained to his father that he was not receiving what he was due. Comparing himself to his younger brother, he felt left out and rejected. Angry that the father's grace extended towards such an undeserving wretch, he lashed out, asking, "What about

me?”

Henry Nouwen has a word for us here: “Often I catch myself complaining about little rejections, little impolitenesses, little negligences. Time and again I discover within me that murmuring, whining, grumbling, lamenting, and griping that go on and on even against my will. The more I dwell on the matters in question, the worse my state becomes... Of one thing I am sure. Complaining is self-perpetuating and counterproductive. Whenever I express my complaints in the hope of evoking pity and receiving the satisfaction I so much desire, the result is always the opposite of what I tried to get.” (*The Return of the Prodigal Son* [New York: Doubleday, 1992] 72-73).

We think our complaining will enlist the sympathy of others, but the opposite is true: our self-rejection drives them away. We end up in the basement by ourselves. We miss the Rose Bowl game celebration.

When we find ourselves uptight, tense and angry, that is a sign we are lost. When we complain and feel resentful, that is a sign that we are lost. When we feel rejected or when we reject ourselves, that is a sign we are lost. When we find ourselves devoid of joy, that is a sign we are lost.

How can we throw off these chains of slavery?

Here is the fourth principle from our text: The Father’s love bids us to enter the house, join the party, and become sons.

There are two sons in this story, and both are lost. But the father demonstrates unconditional grace and love toward each of them.

When the prodigal son returns home, the father’s actions are dramatic. He runs to him, kisses him, and lavishes gifts on him. But then the father goes beyond what we might expect or imagine. When he speaks with his older son, we observe that for the second time he demonstrates unexpected love. He entreats him, absorbing his anger. He does not judge, criticize or reject him, but instead pours out his love on him. He does not scold or rebuke him. He does not accuse either son. And he does not compare them. He knows that each one of them is unique. He wants the older son to understand grace, and to rejoice with him. He assures the son that his rights are fully protected. He tells him that everything that he owns is already his.

We might think that one son is bad and the other good, but the father doesn’t see it that way. He loves them both the same. His desire for both sons is the same. To both he offers the gift of sonship.

Knowing that he is not worthy to be called a son, the younger man hopes he can return home and be a slave. But the father will have none of it. He gives him a robe, a ring, and shoes, he kills the fattened calf and throws a party—all because he wanted his son to experience sonship.

The father had the same desire for his older son. This

man lived in the house, but he was not a son; he related to his father as a slave. He thought he could save himself and so he insisted on remaining a servant. This was the hurdle for the Pharisees. Would they accept the Father’s love of sinners? Would they enter into the sonship that God wanted to give them? We face the same choice. Will we let go of our anger, pride and resentment in order to be sons?

Here is what Paul says in Galatians 4:1-7: “Now I say, as long as the heir is a child, he does not differ at all from a slave although he is owner of everything...But when the fullness of the time came, God sent forth His Son, born of a woman, born under the Law, in order that He might redeem those who were under the Law, that we might receive the adoption as sons...Therefore you are no longer a slave, but a son; and if a son, then an heir through God.”

On our journey to find intimacy with God, law never touches our hearts. Doing good things and avoiding bad things never brings us into the great romance. Something much deeper and more powerful is at work. The kind of intimacy that our hearts long for comes only in receiving God’s love. The kind of freedom and joy we seek comes through receiving sonship, not earning it.

This parable teaches us that sonship is at the heart of intimacy with God. This is not an easy journey, especially for legalists. It is hard to accept a relationship that is so contrary to anything we experience in life; that God doesn’t require anything from us in order to love and accept us. But that is what Jesus is saying throughout this story. Through Jesus we become sons and daughters of God. The spiritual life is the journey where we disconnect from all of our activity to earn what the Father wants to give us as a gift.

Philip Yancey tells this story in one of his books: “I remember a long night sitting in uncomfortable Naugahyde chairs in O’Hare Airport, waiting impatiently for a flight that was delayed for five hours. I happened to be next to a wise woman who was traveling to the same conference. The long delay and late hour combined to create a melancholy mood, and in five hours we had time to share all the dysfunctions of childhood, our disappointments with the church, our questions of faith. I was writing the book *Disappointment with God* at the time, and I felt burdened by other people’s pains and sorrows, doubts and unanswered prayers. My companion listened to me in silence for a very long time, and then out of nowhere she asked a question that has always stayed with me. ‘Philip, do you ever just let God love you?’ she said. ‘It’s pretty important, I think.’” (*The Jesus I Never Knew* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1995] 269).

Many of you are infected with the disease of living under the law, but you find it hard to recognize it. It is hard for you to open up and expose what is really going on inside your heart. It takes a lot of courage to let down your guard and become completely honest with

yourself and with God. But, despite the pain, it is more than worth it. The Father is waiting with open arms to love you. Everything he has is yours. The joy of being a son or a daughter is beyond compare.

I am conscious of the fact that without the working of the Spirit, my words are fruitless. With that said, I want to invite you to join the party. Will you let go of your anger and resentment or whatever it is that is preventing you from entering into the house? Will you let the Spirit drill a hole through the crusty wall that guards your heart? Will you let God love you?

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